



With the help of developers, moving companies, grants and donations, the YWCA has added a second story to its home. **BILL JOHNSON / COURIER TIMES**

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BENSALEM

YWCA now has place to call home

The YWCA, founded in Bucks in 1954, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

By USHMA PATEL
COURIER TIMES

For the first time in 50 years, the YWCA of Bucks County has a home.

It has operated out of rented and donated space for 50 years, moving from Bristol to Langhorne to Newtown and back to Langhorne before Betz Laboratories donated rented space in a home in Bensalem. Last year, General Electric Water Technologies, formerly GE Betz, gave the house to the YWCA after nine rent-free years.

"The Y sees themselves as community builders, and in this case, the community has come back to build us a home," said Lorna Michelson, the execu-

**YMCA or
YWCA ...
what's the
difference?
12C**

**50
years
serving
Bucks
County**



See **YWCA**, 12C

YWCA: Agency gets

From Page 1C

tive director of the YWCA.

With the help of developers, moving companies, grants and donations the YWCA has added a second story to the former three-bedroom rancher. The brown stone, yellow siding and green shutters have a distinctly new feel inside and out.

Although the expanded home gives the YWCA more in-house space, Michelson said, the YWCA plans to continue operating most of its programs in the community.

"That's critical to our mission," Michelson said.

The YWCA's programming occurs through Bensalem, Bristol Township and Morrisville elementary schools, five apartment complexes in Bensalem and Bristol Township, and the St. Mary's Family Resource Center in Bensalem, to name some of the most prominent partners.

Through those centers and its Trevoise office, the YWCA provides youth services, family services and self-sufficiency programs in the areas of education, teen pregnancy, mentoring, parenting, insurance, substance abuse prevention, employment training, citizenship, English skills, drivers education and senior housing.

According to Almira Sharp, president of the YWCA's board of directors, these programs work towards a bigger goal. They also explain why the YWCA, founded in Bucks in 1954, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

"It's giving tools of empowerment to the children and the adults," she said. "They see a need and fill the need....[They've lasted] for staying current for what is needed and providing that."

A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

The YWCA developed the family center initiative in 1992 as a way to reach the immigrant communities that had limited transportation.

The management at Creekside Apartments, Country Commons and Bucks Meadow in Bensalem and Glen Hollow and Lakeview Manor apartments in Bristol Township donated space for the five family centers that the YWCA operates.

Sandy Blitzstein, who oversees the three Bensalem centers, said that each is tailored to the community it serves.

"The largest and most diverse is

YWCA gets funding for center

The YWCA of Bucks County will receive \$100,000 in federal aid, Congressman James C. Greenwood (second from left) announced on Friday.

He made his announcement at the YWCA of Bucks County in Trevoise, which was dedicating a new program outreach center.

The funding will support the YWCA's employment training program that helps prepare adults for the workplace by providing training classes, English as a Second Language courses and parenting classes for teens, Greenwood spokeswoman Stephanie Fischer said.

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Creekside. [The complex] has 1,100 units so it's like a little city. People there are from the Mideast, Africa, China, Russia.... Country Commons is primarily Russian. Bucks Meadow has people from Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, mostly Spanish-speaking countries," she said.

At first the centers mainly taught English, but the coordinators soon identified programs that served the clients' needs.

Now the family centers offer free programs such as preschool, after-school care and homework help, parenting, computer classes, citizenship classes, driving classes and job training. Three of them also serve as emergency food banks. Those are located at Country Commons, Bucks Meadows and Creekside.

According to Jeanmarie Foy, director of the YWCA's employment services, the family center becomes a support system for immigrants without friends or extended family.

"The women and kids get to know each other. That builds a community and strengthens a community," Foy said. "We're helping people become a part of the community and not a burden on it."

Because the YWCA works out of apartment complexes, residents take ownership and offer to clean or volunteer, Blitzstein said. She thinks the personal touch makes all the difference.

"You could get your questions

a home of its own



answered if you called an agency, but here you're offered coffee, the atmosphere is comfortable and it's in their community."

FOSTERING FRIENDSHIPS

On a Tuesday afternoon last week, about a dozen women gathered for their weekly parenting support group at the YWCA's family center at Creekside Apartments in Bensalem.

Sometimes the group, led by Blitzstein and made up entirely of immigrants, hears from a speaker about health care, banking, stress management, legal aid or some other pertinent issue. Last week, the attendees were "decompressing" and making Valentines for kids and husbands and catching up with each other. Blitzstein said some of the women don't have young children or any children but come to socialize.

Based on the five countries represented — Iraq, Israel, Pakistan, India, and El Salvador — the women talk about how to say "I love you" in different languages.

Warda Muthan, a Palestinian Muslim who emigrated 15 years ago, offered her handmade valentine to Rowayda Jaaf, the coordinator of the center. When Jaaf waved her off and told Muthan to give it to her husband, she refused.

"My husband is not here. Take it," Muthan said. "I love you."

Muthan and Jaaf have an especially close relationship, partially

because Jaaf is a Kurdish Iraqi immigrant and can speak Arabic with Muthan. Jaaf helped Muthan pass her driver's license test by translating the manual into Arabic.

Jaaf worked as a mechanical engineer in Baghdad until 1991 and has been working at the Creekside Family Center since 1995. She teaches computer classes four days a week, emphasizes the need for women to be independent and tries to help fill the gaps where needs and services are not in line.

"I'm an immigrant, and I'm thinking about all the things I needed when I came here without my family and friends," Jaaf said.

Many of the women gathered have been coming to the family center for years. Virbala Rindana, 68, was a teacher for 38 years in India and began coming to the family center when it opened. She teaches citizenship classes to the new arrivals and works in the after-school program.

"Sometimes it's hard to teach or to learn [because of the different languages being spoken]," she said, "but a young person has a chance to make a good future."

As a measure of such possibility, there's a chart on the wall. On it are the names of the people who have earned their citizenship just since 1998. And there are 71 names on the wall.

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